The Canterbury Tales “The Reeve's Tale”

[**The Reeve**](http://www.gradesaver.com/the-canterbury-tales/study-guide/character-list#the-reeve)**'s Prologue**

The company laughs at the foolish story of [Nicholas](http://www.gradesaver.com/the-canterbury-tales/study-guide/character-list#nicholas) and [Absolon](http://www.gradesaver.com/the-canterbury-tales/study-guide/character-list#absolon). But the narrator notes that Oswald the Reeve alone is angry because he was a carpenter, like [John](http://www.gradesaver.com/the-canterbury-tales/study-guide/character-list#john), the butt of the joke in the Miller’s Tale. The Reeve then speaks, claiming that, despite his age, he still cunning, and that the qualities of boasting, lying, anger and greed pertain particularly to the elderly. [The Host](http://www.gradesaver.com/the-canterbury-tales/study-guide/character-list#the-host) interrupts this rather bitter monologue, pushing the Reeve to tell his tale if he is to speak at all. The Reeve then promises to “answere” and to some extent “sette [the Miller’s] howve” (“set his hood” – make a fool out of him). [The Miller](http://www.gradesaver.com/the-canterbury-tales/study-guide/character-list#the-miller) has scornfully told a tale, the Reeve continues, about how a carpenter was tricked. The Reeve resolves to “quit” the Miller’s Tale.

**The Reeve's Tale** At Trumpington, near Cambridge, there was a brook upon which stood a mill. The miller who lived there wore ostentatious clothing and could play the bagpipes, wrestle and fish. He also was heavily armed: carrying a “panade” (a cutlass) in his belt, a “joly popper” (small dagger) in his pouch, and a “Sheffeld thwitel” (a Sheffield knife) in his trousers. Bald as an ape, with a round face and flattened nose, this miller’s name was [Symkyn](http://www.gradesaver.com/the-canterbury-tales/study-guide/character-list#symkyn), and he was a dishonest thief, cheating money out of King’s Hall, a Cambridge college, and stealing meal and corn.

His wife came from a noble family, and she was as haughty as ditch-water - “stinking with pride” as the OED has it. The couple had a twenty year-old daughter, and a son who was only six months old and lay in his cradle. The daughter was a large girl with a pug nose, broad buttocks and high, round breasts (though, the narrator is at pains to point out, she did have nice hair).

Two Cambridge students, John and [Aleyn](http://www.gradesaver.com/the-canterbury-tales/study-guide/character-list#aleyn), received permission from the master of the college to see the corn ground at the mill - and resolved not to let the dishonest miller cheat them out of even half a grain of corn. The two clerks arrived at the mill, and greeted Symkyn, telling him they were there to grind their corn and take it back to the college. While they ground the corn in the mill, Symkyn crept outside, found the clerks' horse, and set it loose.

Their cornmeal ground and bagged into sacks, the clerks stepped outside to discover that their horse had run away; Aleyn, almost out of his mind with frustration, forgot all about the corn. The miller’s wife claimed that the horse had run off to the fen with some wild horses, and the two gullible clerks ran off toward the fen. With them out of the picture, the miller took half a bushel of their flour, and told his wife to go and make a loaf of bread out of it, satisfied with himself for outwitting the clerks. Meanwhile, the two clerks ran up and down, spending hours chasing their horse, until, at almost night-time, they caught him in a ditch.

Returning, weary and wet, the two arrived at the mill, finding the miller sitting by the fire, and they begged for his help. Though my house is narrow, the miller joked, I’m sure you’ll be able to make it seem bigger: because clerks can “by arguments make a place / A myle brood of twenty foot of space” (4123-4). Symkyn let the two clerks stay the night, providing ale and bread and a roast goose for dinner.

Symkyn then made them a bed up in his own room, only ten or twelve feet from his own bed. His daughter also had a bed in the same chamber. At midnight, the party had finished eating, and went to bed, the miller’s head shining with the alcohol he had drunk. The miller and his wife got into bed, placing the baby’s cradle at the foot of their bed, and the clerks and the daughter followed suit. Shortly, the miller began to snore. Before much longer, his wife and daughter were joining in, and the noise was such that you could have heard it two furlongs hence.

Aleyn, kept awake by the snoring, prodded John (next to him in the bed), and resolved to have sex with the miller’s daughter, in revenge for the corn that he felt sure the miller had stolen from them. John warned him not to wake the miller – but Aleyn didn’t care for his advice, and proceeded straight to the daughter’s bed, where he very quickly achieved his aim: and continued to achieve it all night.

John, alone in his bed, felt jealous of Aleyn (still having sex with the miller’s daughter) and decided to get some of the action for himself - taking the baby’s cradle from the foot of the miller’s bed and placing it at the foot of his own. Shortly after this, the miller’s wife woke up to go “for a pisse” (4215), and, coming back into the bedroom, felt around in the dark for the cradle – of course, it wasn’t at the foot of her bed, but at the foot of John’s. As she climbed into the bed, John jumped on her, and gave her, “so myrie a fit ne hadde she nat ful yore” (“the sort of good time she hadn’t had for ages”). The two clerks thus lay happily occupied until the third cock crew.

Leaving the bed as the morning dawned, Aleyn was told by the miller’s daughter the location of the loaf of bread made from the corn the miller had stolen. Aleyn crept back to the bed, feeling for the cradle, and finding it with his hand. Thinking that the cradle signified the miller’s bed, Aleyn thought he had the wrong bed, and so continued on toward the next bed, and, finding no cradle at its foot, crept in beside the miller. Taking him by the neck, he spoke to him softly - telling “John” to wake up and make ready to leave, as he had been copulating with the miller’s daughter all night.

“Ye, false harlot, hast?” said the miller, catching Alayn by his Adam’s apple and punching him in the face, causing blood to run down Aleyn’s chest. The two men rolled, fighting, on the floor like two pigs in a poke, up one minute and down the next, until the miller tripped on a stone and fell backwards onto his sleeping wife.

The miller’s wife, thinking a devil had visited her, began to cry out in panic to God, and to her husband to wake up and help her, as she thought the two clerks were fighting. With that, John awoke, and tried to find a stick to help her – but the wife, who knew the room better than John, found it first. Seeing a “litel shymeryng of a light” reflecting the moon’s light, and thinking it Aleyn’s nightcap, the miller’s wife brought down the staff hard onto the miller’s bald skull. “Harrow! I dye” he cried, and fell down. The clerks gave him a beating, dressed themselves, took their horse, their corn and their loaf of bread, and escaped.

The Reeve makes a final proverb at the end of his tale, “One who does evil should not expect good”, before concluding with God’s blessing on the company, adding finally that he has now “quyt the Millere in my tale”.